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ABSTRACT

To look at the issue of institutional constraints that could be affecting the implementation of portfolios in teacher education courses, a 10-item survey was distributed over e-mail to subscribers of four listservs. In addition, several surveys were sent to colleagues of the author who were using portfolios but who were not subscribers to listservs. The first four questions were designed to provide background information on portfolio use. Questions 5-8 dealt with grading and the use of rubrics. Question nine asked about policies, structures or people that have either supported or hindered the use of portfolios. The final question asked about strategies designed to overcome institutional barriers to wider use of portfolios. In general, results indicated that portfolio use is still evolving. While there is concern about issues such as grade inflation, few institutions appear to have actual policies in place. In addition, few of the respondents at this point in time have let those discussions about grades affect them. There is, however, the institutional requirement to give grades; for some teacher educators, this appears to hinder their use of portfolios. Administrators appear to be responding to portfolio use in various ways: some are simply uninterested; others have attempted to prevent instructors from negotiating grades with students. This survey represents only a limited number of views and therefore may be unrepresentative. Of the 27 people who responded to the survey, 12 were not using portfolios and/or responded by requesting results. (TB)

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Portfolios in Teacher Education: Issues, Implementation & Inquiry

Institutional Concerns in Implementing Portfolios in Teacher Education

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In order to look at the issue of institutional constraints that could be affecting the implementation of portfolios in teacher education courses, a 10-item survey was distributed over e-mail to subscribers of four listservs. In addition, several surveys were sent to colleagues I knew who were using portfolios but who were not subscribers to the listservs. Twenty-seven people responded to the survey; of those who responded, 12 were not using portfolios and /or responded by requesting results. Therefore, the following comments represent only a small number of teacher educators who use portfolios and who also use e-mail.

The first four questions were designed to provide background information on portfolio use. There was a wide variety in terms of **number of years** portfolios have been used: 1 year (2); 2 years (3); 3 years (3); 3-4 years (1); 4 years (3); 5 years (1); 8 years (1 for writing); 10 years (1). Portfolios seem to be used more frequently in undergraduate classes than in graduate classes. At the *graduate level*,

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they were used in general literacy courses (5); assessment/diagnosis (2); and in 2 field practica (one of which included both graduate and undergraduate students). At the *undergraduate level* they were used in general literacy courses (3); children's or YA literature courses (2); methods courses at all levels (15); content reading (2); diagnosis classes (2); and in student teaching (1).

When asked to identify **reasons for using portfolios**, respondents' comments seemed to relate to the value they saw for both students and for themselves as teachers. In terms of *student benefits/focus* portfolios were used because they encourage reflective thinking; promote self-evaluation; help students experience the process; allow student -centeredness in the goal-setting and/or selection process; encourage students to look at themselves as readers, writers and life-long learners; and might help them get jobs. For teacher educators, portfolios allow them to assess deep understanding and application of what is being taught; provide knowledge of students; help document learning and teaching; force conferencing about progress and value placed on activities related to progress; and provide an alternative for those feeling constrained by grades alone.

Questions 5 and 6 dealt with grading and the use of rubrics. Seven respondents use portfolios to assign grades while four sue them as part of the grade. "Subjective judgment" is used by one person; several use portfolios as a % of the grade (either they choose what % or it is negotiated); and one person reported using the portfolio along with 4 multiple choice tests. Six teacher educators use a rubric, 2 do not, 2 "sort of" use one, and 2 want to. One person who does not is concerned about avoiding litigation while the other "no"

person wants to develop one. Of those who have used rubrics, the process is still evolving and there is a range between those who create the rubric themselves to those who allow various levels of student input. One teacher educator requires the portfolio but does not grade it; students, however, consider the portfolio when recommending their grades.

Question 6 inquired about **policies related to grade distributions.** Only one respondent reported that such a policy existed; that person does not use portfolios. There seems to be administrative concern about this issue however. One person reported having to get permission *not* to give a final and another is required to give reasons for not having a normal curve. Several teacher educators reported that their administration is looking at grade distributions or have expressed concern over skewed distributions.

The seventh question asked whether there had been dialogue about **grade inflation** and how it affected grading and/or use of portfolios. Thirteen reported the presence of such dialogue, one replied it had occurred at a former institution, and 3 said there had not been discussion about grade inflation. Comments about the effect included, "It makes us cautious"; "Yes, but there is no consensus on how to resolve the issue"; "A task force is addressing the issue"; "We lament grade inflation but nothing is done"' "It is mentioned sarcastically at department meetings"; and "Administrators talk about it--faculty ignore it." Four teacher educators specifically mentioned that they were not bothered by the concern or that it had not affected them.

Question 8 inquired about whether grading policies seemed to **value between student comparisons more than individual growth/progress**

and how that affected grading and use of portfolios. Six respondents indicated between student comparisons were most valued; several of those, however, added that the policy did not affect them, that there is movement to performance assessment or that the policy encourages faculty to use portfolios to counteract the comparison focus. Three teacher educators replied that they were free to position themselves on the issue and decide what is best for students. One stated "I don't worry about what others think about my grades." Seven people indicated that there had been no discussion on the issue. One of those mentioned that while there was no discussion at the institution level, colleagues' belief were a big concern in peer evaluation.

Question 9 asked about **policies, structures or people that have either supported or hindered the use of portfolios**. Interestingly, only a few respondents reported feeling hindered by policies or people. These had to do with grading policies--being required to continue with grades or to give grades at midterm, the department chair not allowing the development of a student-professor negotiated rubric in a graduate reading diagnosis course, or as the following comment suggests, administrators not trusting students to participate in the process: "I've had a contradiction with administrative support. As long as I was the person in charge of the grade, it was okay. Once I tried to relinquish some of that responsibility to the students, I was met with resistance. If students don't have a voice in the grading, then it diminishes the impact of portfolio assessment."

Three comments indicated teacher educators who chose to ignore any attempts by administrators to interfere with grading, or simply that there is no interference. Nine respondents reported that

portfolios were supported at various levels--from setting up peer support groups that share examples and readings to having the elementary education department initiating a major portfolio project. In addition, one teacher educator mentioned that portfolios were used in a report to the Federal Education Department as an innovation in teaching, and another reported that TQM is supported with the adaption of the Alverno model "which means that the outlook for performance assessment looks good."

The final question asked about **strategies** that have been effective in helping to overcome institutional barriers to wider use of portfolios. While a few respondents reported having no strategies available and requesting help in this area, there were a number of effective strategies mentioned. They included: open communication, creating a task force, just doing "my own thing", and having portfolios set as a capstone graduation requirement (although it's unclear how/if the portfolio becomes converted into a grade). Others mentioned realizations that need to happen on the part of colleagues--that faculty who want to use portfolio assessment need to be consistent in their views of evaluation, that portfolios allow students to show greater depth of what they learned, that portfolios help students value learning, and that portfolios are much more intensive that grading finals. "As a consequence," this person said, "I find myself exhausted!". Another respondent mentioned efforts at trying to convert faculty while another reported efforts to work within both systems.

In summary, according to the teacher educators who responded to this survey, the use of portfolio assessment is still evolving.

Portfolios are being used in a variety of undergraduate and graduate literacy education courses, as well as programmatically. While there is concern and discussion about issues such as grade distributions and grade inflation, few institutions appear to have actual policies in place. In addition, few of the respondents at this point in time have let those discussions affect them. There is, however, the institutional requirement to give grades; for some teacher educators, this appears to hinder using portfolios in ways that are congruent with their stated beliefs about the benefits of learner control. Administrators appear to be supporting the use of portfolios at varying levels, ranging from disinterest to preventing professors from negotiating scoring rubrics with students. Again, some teacher educators feel free to "do their own thing" while others feel more constrained. The survey did not ask questions that might have helped determine whether tenured professors felt less constrained by administrators or even other colleagues that those who are not tenured.

Obviously, these data represent a very small and perhaps unrepresentative sample. Feedback related to the survey would be greatly appreciated. What are other questions that need to be asked? Are there other issues/concerns that need to be raised? The survey questions follow.

1. Do you use portfolios in your teacher education classes?
2. How long have you been using portfolios?
3. In how many classes do you use them? Please list the course titles and indicate whether they are graduate and undergraduate.
4. Briefly describe WHY you use portfolios.

5. Explain how you use portfolios to assign grades (e.g., Do you use a scoring rubric? If so, how is it constructed? How much say do students have in constructing a rubric and/or in assigning grades?)
6. Are you required to have a particular grade distribution at your university/your department? Please comment about how this policy (or whatever grading policy operates at your university) affects your grading and your use of portfolios.
7. Has there been dialogue at your institution about grade inflation? How does this affect your grading and/or use of portfolios?
8. Do grading policies at your institution/department seem to value between-student comparisons more than they value individual growth/progress? How does this affect your grading and use of portfolios?
9. Are there policies, structures or people at your institution that have either supported or hindered your use of portfolios? Please explain.
10. What strategies have you found to be effective in helping to overcome institutional barriers to wider use of portfolios?
11. Do you wish to receive summary comments derived from responses to this questionnaire?